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C O N F I D E N T I A L DJIBOUTI 00257
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DJIBOUTI 000257

SENSITIVE
DEPARTMENT FOR AF/E
CJTF-HOA FOR POLAD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2019-03-30
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [ET](#) [DJ](#)
SUBJECT: DJIBOUTI OPPOSITION ROUNDUP: ???PARALYZED??? AND LACKING
PLATFORM

CLASSIFIED BY: J. Swan, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. In a series of recent meetings, Djibouti's small opposition political parties reiterated their longstanding critiques of President Guelleh's ruling coalition, Djibouti's electoral system, and overall lack of political space and dialogue. (Djibouti's most prominent historic opposition movement--the Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy (FRUD)--joined the ruling coalition in 1999). Most but not all in the opposition alliance indicated that another election boycott was likely in 2011, and the sole unaligned opposition party leader has already proclaimed his presidential candidacy. All parties were unanimous in their criticism of current conditions. However, none articulated a clear and concrete platform, and none provided real details on a strategy for the opposition to regroup and prepare for 2011. END SUMMARY.

UAD: WE ARE "PARALYZED"

¶2. (SBU) PolOff and PolAsst met in late February with the three-party opposition coalition "Union for a Democratic Alternance" (UAD). The alliance was represented by "Union for Democracy and Justice" (UDJ) President (and overall UAD group President) Ismail Guedi Hared, "Movement for Democratic Revival" (MRD) Vice President Souleiman Farah Lodon, and "Republican Alliance for Democracy" (ARD) President Ahmed Youssouf. All three opposition parties were founded in 2002. The MRD was banned by the GODJ in July 2008 after MRD President Daher Ahmed Farah, who resides in Brussels, was accused of inviting Eritrea to invade Djibouti. According to Lodon, the MRD continues to appeal the ban through Djibouti's Administrative Court. Hearings in the case have been postponed several times, and were most recently rescheduled

for April 18.

13. (C) The UAD leadership claimed that GODJ surveillance and prosecution had led to what Hared (UDJ) called an opposition "paralyzed" by "permanent pressure." Opposition parties had not held recent meetings and party conferences, they alleged, because of GODJ security forces discouraging such gatherings. None of the parties is currently publishing a newsletter, and all three leaders criticized the GODJ for clamping down on freedom of speech and liberty of the press. MRD's newsletter was shut down by the GODJ on technical grounds in 2007, when the publication's editor, contrary to Djiboutian law, was found to be resident abroad.

14. (C) The UAD reiterated their strong objection to Djibouti's current "winner-take-all" legislative election system. In 2008, the President's ruling "Union for a Presidential Majority" (UMP)--which includes the FRUD--won all 65 National Assembly seats amidst an opposition boycott. Hared (UDJ) linked this boycott partly to the opposition's experience in 2003, when they contested elections, and won 37% of the vote, but failed to win a single seat under winner-take-all rules. For participation to be "worthwhile," he said, there must be a proportional system. Likewise, all three leaders indicated that a boycott would be likely in 2011; saying "we know the results in advance, so there's no point in participating" unless the electoral system itself is changed. Even the local electoral system needs to change, they argued, with elections at a more grassroots level in addition to regional council elections--perhaps even at the locality level.

A DISSENTING UAD VIEW

15. (C) Separately, PolOff met with ARD Head of International Relations Kamil Hassan, who had specifically requested an individual meeting. Hassan agreed with UAD leaders on most points, but admitted that he didn't "know if boycotting is a good strategy." Not participating, he said, would demonstrate a "lack of political courage." Perhaps, he added, it would even be better to "have post election problems than not participate at all." Despite other UAD leaders' views to the contrary, Hassan said that the ARD would likely participate in 2011 elections. However, he also said that the opposition would "ask for proportionality as a condition for participation." He said that the ARD had last held a party conference in November 2007, but was planning another "soon," and that the ARD regional groups held monthly meetings throughout the country. Hassan characterized the UAD as a loose coordination mechanism pulled together during elections only, rather than as a close and permanent merger.

16. (C) While stressing that the opposition was fighting the entire political system in Djibouti, and what they see as "unfair rules of the game," Hassan also agreed that the opposition "needs to present a program." He then outlined a general program of priorities, naming a laundry list of areas for improvement, including decentralization, regional development, infrastructure, pastoral livelihoods, independent judiciary, protection for freedom of speech and expression, job creation, better basic services, and more active international diplomacy.

17. (C) In a separate meeting, "Djiboutian Party for Democracy" President Mohamed Daoud Chehem, who is not/not affiliated with the UAD coalition, confirmed that he had already announced his 2011 presidential candidacy. Last time (2005), Chehem said, he had announced his candidacy only six months in advance of the election, leaving too little time for campaigning. This time, he said, he was leaving plenty of time. In addition, he said that he had deliberately timed his announcement for March 2, two days before the start of the thirtieth anniversary congress of President Guelleh's "People's Rally for Progress" (RPP). Chehem said that while the UAD members already "approve" his candidacy, they do not yet "support" him. Now they must either "participate themselves or support me...but I don't think they will propose a candidate." Chehem correctly predicted that the RPP party congress would call for President Guelleh to stand for a third term, requiring a constitutional amendment. He said that the PDD would call for "international pressure" to prevent a constitutional amendment and a third run. He noted that Djibouti has signed the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, which, inter alia, stipulates that "State Parties shall ensure that the process of amendment or revision of their constitution reposes on national consensus, obtained if need be, through referendum" (Article 10 part 2). (NOTE: Djibouti's constitution can be amended by referendum, or, if the President so decides, by a two-thirds majority vote in the National Assembly. END NOTE). Guelleh, Chehem alleged, has already "destroyed" Djibouti's institutions, leaving the country "in full anarchy." The situation, he warned, is "dangerous," and could lead to "civil war."

18. (C) In the run up to 2011, Chehem said that the PDD planned to establish a newspaper, involve young people in the party, and force the question of press and radio freedom-despite a meager campaign budget. He said that PDD also intended to participate in 2011 regional elections, even though he considered the 2006 regional elections more of a "negotiated solution between all parties" than a "true election." In 2011, Chehem said, PDD would call for 1) a "truly" independent electoral commission, 2) assessors (separate from party observers) at each polling place chosen by the parties instead of by the GODJ, and 3) the right for each party to obtain a copy of the vote count from each polling place. Although Chehem said that he planned to leave the country until July, he said that the PDD would soon begin an active campaign. He reported that the PDD had already been lobbying supporters to register to vote, despite hearing accusations from some that the Ministry of the Interior was subsequently removing names from the lists illegally. "President Guelleh's power is our weakness and silence," he said.

COMMENT

19. (C) In the weeks after the RPP's party congress, talk about a possible third term for President Guelleh is amplifying. While several other actors-including the union of retired government employees-have now come out publicly in support of a third mandate, all of the UMP coalition partners, save the smallest and newest member, have kept their silence. Many surmise that powerful coalition partners--including the historic armed opposition movement, FRUD--are still holding out, and perhaps planning to negotiate more seats and positions for themselves in return for supporting a third run. UMP coalition partners probably pose a more serious possible challenge to President Guelleh's third term plans than opposition challengers-which most Djiboutians, including the opposition themselves-see as weak.

¶10. (C) In ongoing conversations with opposition leaders and with the GODJ, Post will continue to explore what the opposition seeks in order to participate in the 2011 elections. Furthermore, Post will encourage opposition parties to present possible supporters with concrete, well-developed platforms. None of the parties has yet provided such a plan, and they are unlikely to garner real support without explaining to ordinary Djiboutians what they might accomplish if in power. END COMMENT.
SWAN